Mondo Mysterium #1 (November 2021)

Investigations into mondo cinema

Love: Hard and Violent (1985)
Pierced (1996)
ROT: Return of Traces (ca. 1990s)

Welcome to Mondo Mysterium #1

Hello and welcome to the premiere release of *Mondo Mysterium*, a monthly(ish) video service which will send you three obscure mondo films (and related 'fellow traveler' content like shockumentaries and other fringe documentaries) alongside some word vomit about the films to help situate them within the broader mondo canon.

Two housekeeping things to note: firstly, *Mondo Mysterium* is not primarily intended for those who are just dipping their toes into the genre. This project assumes that you have a working familiarity with things like the differences between a mondo film and a gore mixtape, for instance (or that you already know what mondo cinema is in the first place—when done right, a seamless blending of the real with the staged, serving as a *reductio ad absurdum* exposition of cultural prejudices via the showcasing of the true depths of worldwide human experience).

The films presented in each release will typically be obscure and little-known even to seasoned genre fans. Though this is by design, it's not meant as a form of gatekeeping; rather, the point of this project is to spotlight neglected films, not to give a platform to popular titles which don't need it. While beginners are by all means welcome to partake, you may find many of the references obscure and the films themselves impenetrable. The way mondo cinema handles sensitive topics like sexuality and race is deceptively complex, and these films are not amenable to oversimplification; those who come to them unequipped are oft prone to dismiss them in disgust, losing out on the oftentimes intricate nuance at play on-screen. If you're just getting to know the genre, an excellent introductory textbook of sorts is *Killing for Culture*, and should be seen as required preliminary reading.

Secondly, I'm neither a graphic designer, nor an artist, nor even remotely competent at using the computer; I'm just someone who enjoys mondo films and wants to share them. To that end, please

don't expect to see, and in turn be disappointed by a complete lack of, any sort of design and layout. The essays are simple unformatted text, and the films are in plain sleeves. The focus is solely on the content, not the presentation. The goal of this project is twofold: it is to write about obscure films and to actually put them in your hands. That's it. It's not for you to have a pretty Instagram photo.

The inaugural three titles for the first *Mondo Mysterium* release are the English language print of *Love: Hard and Violent* (*Love – duro e violento*) (1985), which runs longer than the censored Italian theatrical print floating around and is one of the sleazier mondo productions in existence; *Pierced* (1996), an obscure piercing documentary showcasing the body modification subgenre of shockumentary cinema; and finally, a partial workprint of *ROT: Return of Traces*, which was meant to be a new installment in the *Traces of Death* series, but was never released.

Finally, if you're reading this, you're one of the very small handful of folks who decided to put your faith in the premiere release of this project; *thank you!* I hope to see you next month with three new releases, just be sure to get in touch with me to let me know if you want them. Feel free to spread the word about the project through your standard channels, social media or otherwise, in case you know others who may be interested in subscribing.

On with the show.

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- The helicopter crash on the set of *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983), which resulted in the deaths of actor Vic Morrow alongside two child actors; a clip previously seen in the likes of *Death Scenes 2* (1992) and *Snuff Video: Volume Red* (1997).
- Iconic footage of nine-year-old 'Napalm Girl' Phan Thị Kim Phúc, running naked down a road after being injured in a napalm attack.
- Olympic skier Matt Petri's wipeout.
- The assault on truck driver Reginald Denny during the 1992 LA riots.
- A killer whale living up to its name and attacking a trainer. See also the documentary *Blackfish* (2013), for more trainer attacks alongside a searing indictment of orca captivity.
- A Hezbollah firing squad execution in Lebanon, previously appearing in the likes of *Executions* (1995), and later in *Terrorists, Killers & Middle-East Wackos* (2005).

Notably missing is the obligatory clip of the Budd Dwyer suicide as well as other shockumentary staples like Gary Plauché's revenge killing of Jeff Doucet captured, like so many '90s clips, on live television. Perhaps these well-trodden clips were being saved for the longer cut of the film.

Though it is thus ultimately utterly disposable, being composed of countless recycled previously-seen footage, *ROT* stands as a curious artefact, an unreleased '90s shockumentary; who knows how many more similarly-shelved and forgotten productions there are currently languishing on moldy tapes in dusty boxes.

This rough cut amounts to only 19-½ minutes of available footage, though it's more than enough to get a feel for what this is: a generic mix of shock and death clips, "enhanced" via schlocky Video Toaster-style editing effects, while an equally generic mix of techno and rock music plays in the background—presaging the modern shockumentary mixtape's tendency to dispel with narration and opt for an irksome soundtrack instead.

The film starts off bizarrely enough, with the typical boilerplate shots of bodies and crashes being interspliced with footage of wildlife and what appears to be a petting zoo for the first few minutes, before whatever half-baked metaphor was attempted here is dispensed with entirely and the rest of the footage is composed solely of standard shockumentary fodder which appeared in countless shockus throughout the 1990s. Some of the instantly recognizable footage crammed into the 20 available minutes includes:

***Love: Hard and Violent* (1985)**
(aka *Love* aka *Love – duro e violento*)
Dir. Claudio Racca
87 min.

There are two tonal extremes in approaches to the mondo form. On the one hand, there are the quirky and borderline quixotic takes on worldwide whimsy—lighthearted, perhaps even downright chirpy productions like *I malamondo* (1964) and the canonical *Mondo cane* (1962) itself; films which, despite mayhap sporadically sprinkling in some obligatory gratuitous gore, nonetheless generally don't veer anywhere to the south of sheer sardonicism, contenting themselves with a good *reductio ad absurdum*-style ribbing of cultural mores, old and new alike.

On the other bloody and lubricant-stained hand, we have mondo movies along the lines of *Estou com AIDS* (1986) and *Droga sterco di* Dio (1987). These films are decidedly darker—sordid, seedy productions which leave you feeling like you just stumbled out of a sub-basement fetish party covered in any number of fluids of varying viscosity and safety. Being thusly utterly unpalatable to broader audiences, this sub-domain of mondos also typically lacks the barrage of modern-day digital media releases which is bestowed upon the lighter entries in the genre.

Claudio Racca's *Love – duro e violento* (trans. *Love: Hard and Violent*) (1985) is decidedly in the latter category. *Love* is a film oozing with pure perversion and contempt, as opposed to awe, of the world; a tone which is casually established from the outset, when during the opening credits over a thumping upbeat disco beat, amidst throes of bodies grooving out on the dance floor, a quick shot shows a woman who appears to be in the process of being raped.

***Traces of Death VI* (ca. 1990s) (workprint)**
(aka *ROT: Return of Traces* aka *Koyaanisquashki: Life is Hell*)
Dir. ?
19 min.

The story (keeping in mind that it has been recited second or even thirdhand, potentially affecting the accuracy) behind this print is as follows. In the late ’90s, Dead Alive Productions received a rough cut of a shockumentary originally entitled *Koyaanisquashki: Life is Hell*, which Dead Alive in turn decided to rename *ROT: Return of Traces*, to tie in to their growing *Traces of Death* series. By the end of the century, however, Dead Alive Productions had folded, and Darrin Ramage would go on to start Brain Damage Films at the beginning of the new millennium. Somewhere in that shuffle, *ROT* appears to have been completely lost to time, never seeming to have been released.

The original title, *Koyaanisquashki: Life is Hell*, is a clear nod to *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance* (1982), which is itself a meditation on humankind’s encroachment upon, and devastation of the planet, albeit with a subtler, artsier tone than the typical bludgeoning bestowed by shockumentary cinema. Much like *Koyaanisqatsi*, *Koyaanisquashki* contains no spoken narration, mercifully reprieving the viewer from having to endure the tedious shockumentary tradition of having an increasingly-grating narrator present throughout the proceedings. Instead, *ROT* graces us with the nonsensical presence of what appears to be adult film actress SaRenna Lee, twirling in the buff around Hollywood Hills in between segments, occasionally offering missives along the lines of “Here’s the Hollywood Bowl…and here’s my ass”.

just being utterly mediocre and unremarkable. These painful-to-endure interviews are interspliced with various performative installations, including a plow being dragged via chains attached to piercings and pierced personages being painted to look like statuesque sculptures standing around an exhibition space. The background behind these installations via artist interviews would have been infinitely preferable to the aforementioned 'man on the street'-style convention interviews.

The ultimate takeaway from *Pierced* appears to be that while particular piercings and body modifications may occasionally rouse interest, the people undergoing them are typically not interesting in the least—an insignificance which ironically makes them identical to those they so desperately try to differentiate themselves from (those being people sans piercings); a fact which they seem cognizant of, albeit nascently, as self-awareness generally does not appear to be a strong suit among this crowd. The underlying thinking, if any, appears to be 'I'm an irritating dumbass precisely like the rest of normative society, but on top of that I'm also a douche with a guiche' (that's a taint piercing, for those not up on their piercing vernacular).

Love is an opiate-induced nightmare hell-trip into a world of zoophilia and abattoirs, a frenzied foray into tarantism and cryonics, a manic leap into animal insemination and sex reassignment surgery.

By the time Claudio Racca directed *Love*, he was already a battle-worn mondo paratrooper, having served as the cinematographer on nearly a half-dozen prior mondo expeditions like *L'amore primitivo* (1964), *Svezia – inferno e paradiso* (1968), *The Wild Wild World of Jayne Mansfield* (1968), *Angeli Bianchi…angeli neri* (1969), and *Questo sporco mondo meraviglioso* (1971). A decade prior to *Love*, Racca had also directed a previous mondo feature, *Tomboy – I misteri del sesso* (1977). *Tomboy* focuses predominantly on issues of gender identity (much like a micro subgenre of other mondo productions like *Let Me Die a Woman* (1977) and *Intersesso* (1981)), though themes like the gay community in New York City appear to have had a continued attraction for Racca, who briefly returned to the topic in *Love*. In fact, a couple other scenes from *Tomboy*—the zoophile dog sex clip and the naked poolside 'concubines'—were even re-used outright in *Love*.

Love doesn't leapfrog into as many countries as other mondos—confining itself to predominantly the US, Italy, and Scandinavia (alongside a segment in Brazil, and still another in a couple 'unnamed' countries)—albeit without adversely impacting its sheer breadth of scope in the least. The film's scant 77-minute runtime still manages to pack in more than 30 disparate scenes. Though *Love*, at least in title, ostensibly attempts to situate itself amidst the then-thriving (or is that throbbing?) sub-genre of sex-crazed mondos like *Sexual Aberration (Sesso perverso)* (1979) and *Mondo Sexualis USA* (1987), the pretension to thematic cohesiveness—of vignettes being centered around notions of the titular 'love'—is quickly and self-consciously dispelled with at the very outset (though it is returned to, here and there). "No need to ask yourselves what drugs have to do with a film on love" we are told, before being whisked away on a global exploration of opiate production, only to then take an impromptu drive

fog of myopic megalomania appears to be too dense for the interviewees to grasp that the feeling is very certainly mutual: it is exceedingly likely that no one either gives a shit or even much thinks about them either.

Others meanwhile offer exorbitantly insightful rationale for their augmentations, along the lines of "I'm not sure why I decided to get my clit pierced, it was just a spur of the moment thing". Well, gee. Though all of this pales in comparison to the facepalm-inducing interview with a self-proclaimed 'modern primitive' who describes how the piercing jewelry he wears constitute 'trophies for holes in my body', which are, like, *totally* 'tribalistic' and stuff, before—faster than you can say *cultural appropriation*—going on to explain

that he got into piercing after watching the National Geographic channel when he was 11 years old, though he goes on to assure us that he's been getting piercings long before they became 'a fad or a fashion', a point which several interviewees seem to have the need to be sure to point out.

Piercings as constituting a component of sadomasochistic fetish practice are also touched upon, albeit much too briefly, with too much time instead being devoted to eye-roll fodder like one Jennifer Zimmerman claiming that her band Genitorturers wasn't "accepted in the music scene"—the implication being that this is ostensibly owing to band members having piercings and not to, say, the band

so on. Following the general shockumentary trend of moving from video to the online world, the ‘00s also saw the proliferation of the *Pain Olympics* videos, with individuals performing various body modifications—the more garish, naturally, the better (with, in keeping with classic mondo tradition, some being staged and some real).

It was thus amidst such a milieu that *Pierced* (1996) was released (not to be confused with similarly-titled ventures like *Pierced and Painted* (1993)), before quickly fading into obscurity. Directed by Wesley Wing, who shortly afterwards went on to become a prolific tiki carver over the past 20-odd years, as well as performing custom tiki installations via his company Tiki Mondo. *Pierced* oscillates between interviews at a piercing convention and various body modification performance art installations, with close-up shots of a myriad of sexual organs undergoing the piercing process also appearing throughout.

It is in documenting the performative vignettes that the film shines (if only it could avoid using grating video effects); the interview segments generally come off as being extremely cringeworthy. Nearly everyone interviewed appears to be suffering from a persecution complex, getting ridiculously wound up over their piercings with preemptively-defensive retorts like “I never gave a shit what anyone thought of me, never”, and “if people are looking at me funny, I don’t know, and frankly I don’t care”. The ensuing

through York City’s 42nd street of the early ‘80s with grindhouse marquees advertising the likes of *Dallas School Girls* (1981) and *Young Doctors in Lust* (1982), while later still being granted a front-row view of a sex reassignment surgery, with a female-to-male phalloplasty being performed (a compliment to the male-to-female vaginoplasty featured in *Tomboy*), and on, and on…

One of the hallmarks of a successful mondo film, and what *Love* utterly excels at, is its function as an amalgamation of the world’s wonders; an unwieldy, mangled orb of diverse, frayed threads, each of which you can pull at your leisure if you wish to tumble down that particular rabbit hole. In other words, you can pick any random scene in the film, and undertake a deep dive into what exactly is purportedly being depicted, which will subsequently fill up the rest of your day. Take, for instance, the short scene describing feral American war veterans living in untamed forests, owing to the fact that because of their war trauma, they can now “live no other way”. If one wanted to peruse this phenomenon further, there’s a seminal Associated Press article from 1983 about these so-called ‘trip-wire’ veterans who now inhabit America’s forests, as well as the documentary *Soldiers in Hiding* (1985), which is likewise devoted to the topic. *Love*’s own embellishing contribution to this particular narrative is that owing to the veterans being unable to form societal bonds following their traumatic tours of duty, the only possible recourse for any kind of love or connection open to them is to fuck dogs.

Another hallmark of a self-conscious mondo is to collapse the racialized, xenophobic *other*-ing of ‘far away lands’ (and their inhabitants) by juxtaposing domestic, or at least western, scenes alongside anything further abroad. So, too, does *Love* repeatedly point the camera to its own shores, highlighting various bits of Italian esoterica, such as the manic dancing of the tarantism ritual, when frenzied dancers congregate during the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul in the Salento region of Southern Italy, or spotlighting the

rites of the *femminielli*, Italy's third gender population, including a marriage ceremony as well as the *figliata*, or childbearing ritual.

Though other scenes, such as a segment depicting American phone sex operators may at first appear dated and bland, it is in fact surprisingly prescient, anticipating the coming of video phones which the narrators suggest will be use to facilitate phone sex, thus presaging today's immense popularity of camming.

This English version of the film is a longer cut than the Italian theatrical print, the latter abridging the more risqué sequences (the zoophilia, phalloplasty, and abattoir scenes are all reduced, though not excised entirely, in the Italian print). If it were to receive commercial distribution today, the film would very likely similarly be cut, so enjoy this *hard and violent* dive into the many facets of love, and of hate, too.

***Pierced* (1996)**
Dir. Wesley Wing
36 min.

Piercing, tattooing, and general body modification films have long been a shockumentary subgenre staple. Throughout the '80s and '90s, Charles Gatewood's seemingly endless array of Flash Video releases chronicling various piercing and tattooing conventions and their denizens such as the *Penetration* and *Painless Steel* series, alongside his line of *Weird…* travelogues, and rowdy Roy Boy's tattoo and tiger-filled video compilations, often released with on-point titles like *Lick My Ink* and *Ink Up & Pierce Out*, all served to make sure the cup of bodmod video documentation steadily continued to runneth over with ink and blood for decades.

The iconic *Dances Sacred and Profane* came out in 1985, featuring body modification luminary Fakir Musafar, and was swiftly appropriated into the mondo/shockumentary canon via Gorgon Video's *Bizarre Rituals* release. In the mid '90s, by time the Gatewood and Roy Boy releases started to die down, there were plenty of other body modification video ventures to take their place. Joe Christ released *Sex, Blood and Mutilation 1 & 2* (1995-6), and the end of the '90s further saw one-off releases like *Strange Life: The Breech* (1998) and the cult trepanation documentary *A Hole in the Head* (1998), to name a few examples.

The baton, or perhaps in genital piercing slang, the barbell, was in turn passed to Dead Alive Productions with the 1999 release of *Suspension* (focusing on the eponymous body modification practice of hanging the body via piercings made in the skin), portions of which were subsequently spliced into *Traces of Death V: Back in Action* (2000), as well as being prominently featured in *Traces of Death Special* (essentially an abridged release of *TOD V* by Hong Kong distributor Ocean Shores). The new millennium ushered in the release of body modification titles like *Bizarre Bazaar* (2000), *Modify* (2005), *Flesh & Blood* (2007), *On Tender Hooks* (2013), and